

A NEW DAWN—EFFECTIVE WAYS TO SHARE THE GOSPEL WITH NEIGHBOURING FAITHS

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Introduction

During the summer of 1910 in Edinburgh, for the first time, a globally ‘powered’ body of religious significance of the era acknowledged and showed an intentional sense of respect for neighbouring faiths for the role they played in tribal societies. This turning point was at the initial gathering of the World Missionary Conference whose major agenda was ‘continuity with the pre-Christian past and the affirmation of indigenous religious tradition.’^[1] Before this time, these religions were disregarded, stereotyped, and prejudiced against. In Edinburgh 1910, these archaic negative attitudes towards religions of non-Christians were addressed.^[2] It is noteworthy that an attitudinal change towards the religions of other people is necessary for Christian missions in divergent faith communities.^[3]

Likewise, neighbouring faiths are not to be wished away. We need to understand them as traditions of a people’s response to that awareness of, and claims of the Transcendent God upon their lives and cultures. With this understanding, the gospel must be used as the Interpreter of all cultures, traditions, and neighbouring faiths. For this reason, the next subsequent sections will briefly explain some neighbouring religions and sects in our world today; these include African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam, the Mormons, Baha’i Faith, Eckankar, Hare Krishna, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The core of this paper highlights key points that are basal tools necessary in sharing the Good News with people who already possess an established faith different from the Christian.

Introducing Neighbouring Faiths

Primal faiths – African Traditional Religion (ATR)

ATR is the substructure of the world’s religious faiths including both Christianity and Islam. It is the oldest religion in Africa, it has no revealed book as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Its scripture is orally committed to memory and passed down from one generation to the other, maintaining the customs and traditions of African people. ATR acknowledges the existence of the Supreme Being, the Ultimate; divinities; benevolent and malevolent spirits that work in favour or against humankind. The spiritual and physical world are perceived as inseparable; meaning whatever happens in the spirit world manifests in the physical. Therefore, sickness and death are a result of the realities in the spiritual. In primal societies of the African man is ‘akin to nature, a child of Mother Earth and brother to plants and animals which have their own place in the universe may enter into a totemic spiritual relationship with men in the way the environment is used; with...respect and reverence, without exploitation. Thus, wanton destruction is often regarded as evil...’^[4] The life of traditional Africans is economically and socially dependent on the environment.

Islam

Islam was founded on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century AD. Life was chaotic known as

^[1] J. Stanley Friesen, *Missionary Responses to the Tribal Religions at Edinburgh, 1910* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1996), p1.

^[2] Friesen, *Missionary Responses to the Tribal Religions at Edinburgh, 1910*, pp. 135, 139.

^[3] Haruna Y. Mogtari, *The Redeemed; A Journey of Conversion from Islam to Christianity* (SonLife Ghana Limited: Accra, 2017), pp. 51-55.

^[4] Harold Turner, ‘The Primal Religions of the World and their Study’. In V. Hayes (ed.), *Australian Essays in World Religions* (Bedford Park: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1977), pp. 27-37(30)

jahiliyya, an age of ignorance.^[5] After Muhammad was born, he experienced spiritual ecstasy and received a supposed revelation from God. This event was perceived as a sign of the supernatural from God. Indeed, it marked a turning point that culminated in the development of Islam. Muhammad began to preach with confidence about his new religious ideas. He did not think he was beginning a new religion because the Arabs already believed in One God, Allah, but never had had a prophet before the time. Muhammad’s clan, the Quraysh, believed it was Allah who created the world and He would sit as Judge in the Last Days.^[6] Muhammad was based in Mecca but moved to Medina because of persecution. This movement is known as *Hijra* and marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Muhammad established a theocratic system of governance—the religio-politico, judicial, and military framework, that would shape and influence the spread of Islam beyond the shores of Arabia.^[7] After Muhammed died in 632 AD, Islam spread to North Africa, Asia, and parts of Europe through conquest but in Africa, south of the Sahara, Islam was spread through Africa’s own terms and conditions, the policy of tolerance and accommodation.^[8]

The terms ‘Islam,’ ‘Muslim,’ and ‘Salaam’ are rooted in the Arabic letters translated into English SLM meaning surrender or submission. It is here that Islam coined its essence—submission to the will of Allah.^[9] Muslims demonstrate their submission to Allah by prostrating before Him in the five daily ritual prayers (*Salat*).

Below are the core beliefs in Islam and the Five Pillars of Islam. The whole Islamic Faith is hinged on these beliefs and practices.

Six beliefs^[10]

- Tawhid – The Oneness of God
- The holy Qur’an – the Word of Allah
- The messengers of Allah – who include Adam,



Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad

- Allah’s agents – angels (*jinn*)
- The Last Day – the resurrection of the dead, judgment – paradise or hell
- Divine preordained happenings in life under Allah’s authority and will

The Five Pillars^[11]

- Kalima Shahadah – Faith – Islamic creed that there is only one God
- Salat – Ritual prayer – five times a day turn towards the Ka’aba in Mecca
- Zakat – Mandatory charity – almsgiving – care for elderly, widows, orphans
- Sawm – Fasting – observance of Ramadan
- Hajj – Pilgrimage to Mecca

The core teaching of Islam is *tawhid*, the Oneness of God. Muhammad emphasized the need to care for

^[5] Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994), P. 45

^[6] Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994), P. 52.

^[7] John Azumah, *My Neighbour’s Faith; Islam Explained for Christians* (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2008), pp. 15-20.

^[8] Lamin Sanneh, *Beyond Jihad; The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 10-13.

^[9] Gerhard Nehls & Walter Erics, *Islam Basic Aspects; As it sees itself, As others see it, As it is* (Life Challenge Africa, SIM: Nairobi, Kenya, 2009), p. 5.

^[10] Ahmad Agyei, *Sharing the Love of Christ with your Muslim Neighbours*, (Straight-Way Chapel International: Kumasi, 2015), pp. 83-86.

^[11] Ahmad Agyei, *Sharing the Love of Christ with your Muslim Neighbours*, (Straight-Way Chapel International: Kumasi, 2015), pp. 87-88.

the elderly, widows, and orphans. He warned people who did not believe and worship One God about the existence of hell. It is important to note also that Islam is a call to submission rather than to an intimate relationship with God which Christianity proclaims.

Hare Krishna^[12]

‘Hare Krishna’ are the words that members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness chant when they meet for worship. The movement was begun in the United States of America around 1966 by A.C. Bhaktivedanta (Swami Probhupada) after he emigrated from India. Hare Krishna is a renewed form of Hinduism in the West but it makes claims to ancient roots. The deity Krishna, the lover-deity, is the incarnation or human avatar of a solar deity called Vishnu in the sacred scripture of *Bhagavadgita*.

Hare Krishna recognizes the four-caste system whose place is decided by aptitude and not birth. They believe human beings are souls possessing Krishna’s highest energy. To attain peace and happiness, a person needs to return to their original relationship with Krishna called Krishna

Consciousness through bhakti-yoga. This involves acknowledging Krishna as the highest personality of the godhead. Krishna’s servants work for him without expecting reward and surrender to Krishna and his representative, the spiritual master on earth. Hare Krishna prohibits gambling, use of intoxicants, eating meat, and engaging in illicit sex. Believers chant in a congregation and in private to purify themselves.

Hare Krishna is an authoritarian and conservative movement that appeals to young people. The men shave their heads except for the topknot. Men and women devotees wrap themselves in Hindu style clothes. Their chant in worship is ‘Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Lord Krishna, Hail Krishna.

The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (LDS)–The Mormons^[13]

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) was established in 1830 by Joseph Smith, in New York City, USA. When Joseph Smith turned 14 years old, he prayed to God to know the Church with which he was to fellowship. He believed God and Jesus came to Him and told him that the true Church of Jesus Christ was not yet in the world, that all the other Church denominations were wrong, and they had chosen him to restore the Church on earth.

Smith believed an angel called Moroni who appeared to him and prophesied about how God was going to judge the world. Smith was given gold plates, on which he claimed were written the ‘fullness of the everlasting Gospel...’ In 1829, he began to translate this ‘Gospel’ into what became known as the book of Mormon with Oliver Cowdery assisting him as the scribe. Mormon teaching is based on the King James English Version of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenant (revelations given to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young), and the Pearl of Great Price, a book of writings believed to be from Smith and some of his contemporaries.

Smith worked to establish LDS as the true Church. The LDS believe that Jesus called Joseph Smith as



^[12] International Consciousness for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). “Founder-Acharya”, <https://www.iskcon.org/What-is-iskcon/>, 2014.

^[13] Lindsley, David & Parson, Del (eds.), *The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Intellectual Reserve, Inc.: USA, 1999). *An Introduction to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Intellectual Reserve, Inc.: USA, 2014). Walter Martin & Ravi Zacharias (eds.), *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Bloomington, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), pp. 193-260.



the prophet to direct the Church on earth through revelation.

Members of the church are popularly called Mormons. The church has spread throughout the world. Currently, LDS has sent over 1.1 million missionaries and they claim to have over 15.6 million members with more than half living outside the USA. Generally, their missionaries are well-trained and self-funded.

Mormons teach that the Godhead is comprised of three distinct gods, that the Father and Jesus Christ are physical persons, men who transformed into gods with a united purpose. They also believe that Jesus was the by-product of sexual union between God and Mary and that Jesus was married during his lifetime on earth.

LDS prohibits the use of stimulants and depressants such as alcohol, coffee, tea, tobacco, and caffeinated soft drinks. Non-Mormons are not allowed to enter beyond the outer court of the Mormon temple.

Baha'i Faith^[14]

The Baha'i Faith was founded by Mirza Hussein-Ali-Nuri (1817-1892) in 1863 in Iran (then Persia). He took the name Bahauallah meaning the 'Splendor of

Allah' and said he was a messenger from God with a new revelation. Their central text is Kitáb-i-Aqdas or Aqdas ("the Book of Laws" or the Book of Aqdas). There are other sacred texts.

Baha'i is a unification of all the major religions including Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. They teach that all religions are worthy and that all people are equal. The Baha'i faith has no clergy. It is directed by the Universal House of Justice, comprising of nine elected-leaders who oversee the spiritual and secular activities for five years while each Baha'i community is also similarly supervised by an annual sub-elected leader. Hussein-Ali-Nuri attained the title 'Radiation from God' claiming his teaching was universal while promoting mutual love and good works—a universal language of all religions. He also claimed to be the 'returning Christ, the reincarnation of Krishna, the fifth Buddha, and the embodiment of Hussein, the grandson of Muhammad. Baha'i Faith believes that God is an "Unknowable Essence" and incomprehensible. And to enable us to know him at all, he appears to us in a human form. Thus Baha'i faith is the most recent of God's manifestations. They believe that God created the world, and everything in it reflects some attributes of Him. So, the immortal soul of man contains all the attributes of God but these cannot be tapped unless they are developed through the effort of the individual as his/her spiritual responsibility. Neither the devil can stop the fulfillment of that duty nor can any external force redeem him/her from the punishment that comes with failure. Similarly, heaven is the reward for the one who attains the quest for that spiritual advancement by daily studying the sacred writings and performing their regular prayers but failure will end that person in hell. Three of these prayers are compulsory each day, while hundreds of prayers are for occasions. They also hold annual ritual fasting.

The Baha'i faith claims the words of the founder contain laws and moral imperatives that have the power to free the human spirit from worldly wickedness and that it is the duty of seekers to aspire for these ideals.

In attempting to unite the world's major faiths to deal with their adverse effects on human beings,

^[14] Nehls et al, *Islam Basic Aspects; As it sees itself, As others see it, As it is* (Life Challenge Africa, SIM: Nairobi, Kenya, 2009), pp. 65-67. Walter Martin & Ravi Zacharias (eds.), *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Bloomington, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), pp. 321-350.

Bahau'llah oversimplified the distinctiveness of each faith. He did not acknowledge Christ's redemptive work for the world.

Jehovah's Witnesses^[15]

The founding of the Jehovah's Witnesses is linked to predictions of the end of the world and Christ's second coming that occurred in the 1840s and then again in 1874 in the USA. As the world did not end in 1874, some believed that Christ had returned as an invisible being in what was known as the "Secret Rapture".

Jehovah's Witnesses teach that after the death of the last apostle, John, the Church of Jesus Christ became corrupt and was restored in the 1800s by Charles T. Russell, who would prepare the world for Armageddon. This battle of the righteous forces against evil ones will annihilate all non-Jehovah's Witnesses and usher in the millennial reign of Christ during which time there is an opportunity for others to be resurrected alongside Jehovah's witnesses. At the end of the millennial reign, the earth will be cleansed and restored into paradise. Those who are victorious will be crowned with everlasting life. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that the restored kingdom of God will be divided into two, the heavenly and earthly classes. The most righteous people will live forever on earth just like in Eden and 144, 000 will enter into heaven and live with God or Christ and rule over the earth.

If Jehovah's Witnesses wish to come through the Armageddon they have to preach the good news to those that are lost, but if they refuse they will lose their salvation just as those who will perish without hearing.

The Jehovah's Witnesses accept the Bible as the inspired word of God but they consider the original Old and New Testaments as exclusively for the Hebrews and Greeks. However, they use their own translation of the Bible: the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*. The name 'Jehovah Witnesses' comes from Isaiah 43:11, 'ye are my witnesses saith Jehovah, and my servant whom I have chosen.' They

chose the English word 'Jehovah' as the proper name for God even though the original Hebrew name is Yahweh.

The JWs believe that they are the only ones who possess the Christian truth through the divine authority of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. They reject the doctrine of the Trinity and do not also recognize Jesus and the Holy Spirit as divine. Thus refer to Jesus as a creation of God, and the Holy Spirit as God's active power on earth which they refer to as 'it'. Their beliefs suggest that Hell is not real and that sinners will only cease to exist in any form. They teach that everlasting life is conditional on the individual's obedience. Jehovah's Witnesses adhere to rigid moral behavior such as no divorce except for infidelity. They disallow blood transfusion because it is a sin that leads to eternal destruction. Witnesses do not salute the flag of any kind, celebrate holidays, enlist into the armed forces, attend college, vote, run for public office, sing the national anthem and engage in any political activity. Similarly, they regard other religions and even traditional Christianity as the work of Satan and do not worship with non-Witnesses which they regard as sinful. Their place of worship is called 'kingdom hall' rather than church and they believe Jesus was crucified on a straight stake and not the cross; thus they forbid the cross.

Eckankar^[16]

Eckankar (ECK) means 'Co-worker with God'. Paul Twitchell founded this religious movement in 1965 yet Eckists believe that their spiritual teachings date beyond the beginnings of human existence. Eckankar possibly draws some of its teachings from Hindu and Sikh teachings. Twitchell is believed to have studied under numerous ECK masters and was the living ECK master until he died in 1971. The present living ECK Master is Sri Harold Klemp. Eckankar spiritual headquarters is in Minnesota, USA. It has members in 100 countries.

The spiritual purpose of the living ECK is to assist people to connect to the light and sound of God – to find their way to God. Eckists believe that they

^[15] Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults; Christian Science – Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism – Seventh-Adventism* (Exeter, Devon, England: The Paternoster Press Ltd., 1979), pp. 223-239. Walter Martin & Ravi Zacharias (eds.), *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Bloomington, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), pp. 321-350.

^[16] Moor, Mary Carroll, Joan Klempt & Anthony Moore (eds.), *Eckankar – Ancient Wisdom for Today* (Quality Books Inc.: USA, 1995).

are connected to God through Divine Spirit (the ECK). The ECK can be seen as light and heard as sound. To become a co-worker with God, a person has to be spiritually purified through contact with the ECK. They do this through spiritual exercises such as singing *Hu*, a love-song to God, organised by the Eckankar community and guided by the living ECK master. Their holy scripture is *Shariyat-Ki-Sugmad* (“Way of the Eternal”)

Eckankar teaches that the soul is eternal and it exists because God loves it. It is also on a journey of self and God-realization. They also teach that one can explore the spiritual world through soul travels and dreams.

At the core of Eckankar, beliefs are karma (sin) and reincarnation. The ECK cleans one’s karma to make it possible for the person to understand and receive the fullness of God’s love. The law of karma says: a person’s reincarnate life either here on earth or in the ‘hereafter’ is determined by his/her good or bad deeds.

Sri Harold Klemp teaches that children have a better knowledge of God than adults who outgrow or reject their childhood understanding of God. For him, children at a very tender age still carry the knowledge and perception of God from their previous life into present life through incarnation.

Witness in Neighbouring Contexts

To begin with, we must understand that it is Christ who saves **not** Christianity and that in such contexts it is appropriate that missionaries live out their

faith among those whom they seek to witness about Christ. So far, we have been exploring the religions–ATR, Islam, Baha’i Faith, and Eckankar; as well as the sects–Mormons and JW’s. These religious faiths and sects are unique in themselves in the sense of their beliefs and practices though they have some affinities. For this reason, in dealing with how to reach out to adherents of each group with the gospel, it would have been more comprehensive should we have tackled each case independently from the other. However, limitations regarding this paper would only allow us to common grounds upon which they can be reached.

Some Common threads through Neighbouring Faiths

The ‘sparks of truth’ and the Gospel	
Neighbouring Faiths	The Gospel
Belief in the Ultimate Being	God has revealed Himself through the son; All ultimacy is in Christ. Heb. 1:1-5; Col. 1:13-22
Aspiration for relationship with the divine	God has provided a means for a relationship with him through Jesus His Son- John 1:12-13
Belief in retribution/karma	Sin has consequences and there is judgment. 1 John; Heb. 2:2-3; John 5:22-25
Purification / ablution	Reconciliation through Jesus Christ for ALL creation Col. 1:19-20; Heb. 10: 1-9; Heb. 1:3;
Belief in hereafter/afterlife/ Incarnation; reincarnation	Resurrection on the last day - John 14: 1-3; John 5: 25-28. We don’t keep coming back

Steps to Sharing the Gospel in Multi-faith Environment

1. Be conscious of the general misconceptions about Christianity among people of Neighbouring Faiths and address them directly or indirectly
2. Pray for those you have identified to witness to. Note that this initial phase can be adopted as a ministry to unbelievers and the duration can vary from several days to years. Specifically, pray for them to have a supernatural encounter with Jesus. Many Muslims have had a turning point in their lives through dreams and supernatural interventions.
3. Begin your preliminary physical contact by building a genuine and godly friendship with their interest at heart.
4. Our ministry among neighbouring faiths should be built around issues of structural injustice affecting their communities economically, socially, and politically. These will help our ministry and missions become relevant in their contexts.
5. Understand the social norms and observe those that do not contradict your Christian faith to avoid unnecessary offenses. Paul testified to

this when he said: ‘I have become all things to all men that I might, by all means, save some.’

6. Appropriate your ministry gift in ways that make it useful to them as a means of opportunity in your witness.
7. Be sensitive to the Holy Spirit to identify wandering souls that are seeking spiritual truth like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman in the book of John. This is a subtle doorway to witness to people of other faith.
8. Note that Witness among neighbouring faith is not a one-touch event but a long haul and so we must pace ourselves and approach it to step by step.
9. Establishing trust with people of other faiths is an indispensable ingredient in our ministry to them.
10. The crux of our witness is the ability to identify bridges, core values, and beliefs, between the Gospel and other faiths as bases for generating fruitful conversations leading to the affirmation of the unique person and ministry of our Lord Jesus.

The Challenges in Reaching Neighbouring Faiths

Personal problems

- Lack of conviction
- Fear and shyness – fear people will ask questions they can’t answer
- Lack of understanding both of the Gospel and the neighbouring faith

Social problems

- Our lifestyle
- In your area, people know you very well
- Work – you don’t have time
- Family issues getting in the way– daily household chores

Approach problems

- Lack of creativity in our witness approach
- Failure to recognize that witness comes through responding to life – home, work, school, community, issues of injustice, problems in the environment

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the field of souls, it is important to recognize the three important personalities who are involved—God who causes the fruit of our labour, the sower who plants the Word of God, and the reaper who sees to it that the final harvest is brought in. It is a work in partnership which suggests that in Multi-Faith witness Christian workers in different fields must network in sharing vital information and skills. This is the only way by which the Lord uses our strengths in perfecting the weakness of each other.



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